

Australian Open

Major letdown for US women: Venus, Stephens out in Melbourne

By JOHN PYE Associated Press

MELBOURNE, Australia — U.S. Open champion Sloane Stephens was first to go, followed quickly by last year's Australian Open runner-up, Venus Williams.

CoCo Vandeweghe went out next as things really started to go crazy for the U.S. women, who eventually lost nine out of 10 first-round matches on a bleak opening day of the Australian Open.

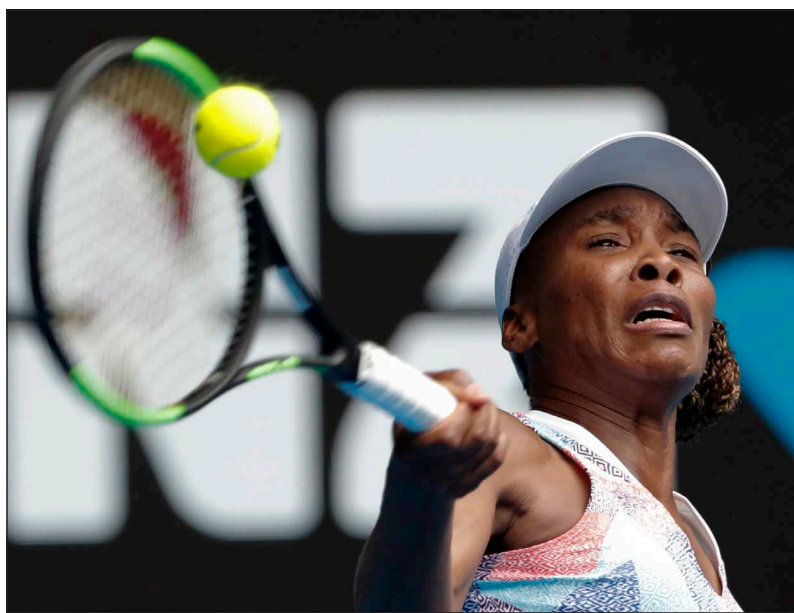
Four months after American women filled all four semifinal spots at the U.S. Open — for the first time in 36 years — three of them are out of contention at the next Grand Slam.

Monday's major letdown was compounded when eighth-seeded Jack Sock and No. 16 John Isner joined the procession of U.S. first-round losers.

In her first match at Rod Laver Arena since a vintage run in 2017 ended in a championship loss to sister Serena, Venus Williams lost her opener to Belinda Bencic 6-3, 7-5 to ensure the title won't stay in the family.

Serena Williams hasn't played a Grand Slam tournament since winning her 23rd major in Australia last year because of her pregnancy and the birth of her first child.

Fifth-seeded Venus was considered a serious contender in her 77th



AP Photo/Vincent Thian

United States' Venus Williams makes a forehand return to Switzerland's Belinda Bencic during their first round match at the Australian Open in Melbourne, Australia on Monday.

major to break a Grand Slam title drought dating back to 2008.

Bencic, who had never taken a set off Venus in four previous matches and had lost to Serena in the first round last year, had other ideas.

"I think I had a little bit too much respect, played a little bit careful and safe," Bencic said of her four previous losses to Venus. "This time I really tried to come out and hit it big."

Bencic saved five break points in the eighth game before a rain delay caused an almost half-hour suspension of play as the roof was closed on Rod Laver Arena. She returned on a roll, winning the next six points to clinch the first set, and then dominated the second.

Venus had 26 unforced errors and 22 winners, and said she didn't get the luck of the draw by having to play somebody who has been ranked as high as No. 7.

"I don't think I played a bad match. She just played above and beyond," Williams said. "I just have to give her credit for that."

The 20-year-old Bencic, who was born a couple of months after the last time there was no Williams in the second round at the Australian Open (1997), hit 32 winners, had 12 unforced errors and converted five of 11 break-point chances.

She credited playing with Roger Federer at the Hopman Cup — where they teamed up to win for Switzerland — with helping her recent improvement. Having Federer's parents supporting her in the crowd also helped.

Stephens was the first American to falter, losing 2-6, 7-6 (2), 6-2 to No. 34-ranked Zhang Shuai to extend her losing streak since the U.S. Open to eight matches.

"Tennis is definitely a roller coaster," said the 13th-seeded Stephens, who was broken while serving for the match in the second set. "But I have learned to just not panic. It will be OK."

It wasn't OK for the 10th-seeded Vandeweghe, a semifinalist in Melbourne and at the U.S. Open last year, who was feeling sick and frustrated in a 7-6 (4), 6-2 loss to Timea Babos.

She yelled an obscenity late in the second set, and then got a time violation for waiting too long for a banana to be brought to the

court between sets, earning a point penalty.

"I was just trying to wait for what I asked for to come and the chair umpire deemed that it wasn't a good enough reason," she said.

CiCi Bellis, Sofia Kenin — who lost to No. 12 Julia Georges, now on a 15-match winning streak — Alison Riske, Taylor Townsend and Jennifer Brady all lost before Nicole Gibbs beat Viktoriya Tomova 6-1, 6-1 to end the streak of eight losses for the U.S. women.

Irina Falconi lost 6-1, 6-1 to No. 23-seeded Daria Gavrilova in the night match, making it 1 for 9.

"Yes we were talking about it in the locker room and some of them were ribbing me that I had to carry the flag for us," Gibbs said. "It was a tough day, and this is a tough sport. This isn't an indication of anything except we have a lot of depth and we had a bad day."

Sock, the highest ranked of the American men, lost 6-1, 7-6 (4), 5-7, 6-3 to Yuichi Sugita, while Isner lost to Australian journeyman Matt Ebden and qualifier Kevin King lost to No. 15 Jo-Wilfried Tsonga.

Ryan Harrison beat Dudi Sela in a sometimes heated five-setter in front of a partisan crowd and qualifier Mackenzie McDonald also bucked the trend for the Americans.

Not everyone found the going tough on a mild opening day in

NFL PLAYOFFS: Jaguars stun Steelers at home, Eagles hold off Falcons

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going to try to stay up and keep it going."

Williams, who had a key interception on a floater to Diggs in the third quarter, arrived a tad early. A pass interference flag would stop the clock with about 5 seconds left, giving the Vikings a chance at a field goal.

Williams awkwardly whiffed on Diggs, taking out cornerback Ken Crawley as Diggs came down, tucked the ball in his right arm and stuck his left hand in the turf to stay up.

If he stumbles there, maybe he gets caught and time runs out. But he kept his balance, his cool — and stayed in bounds — shooting toward the end zone like a sprinter coming out of the blocks.

His 61-yard touchdown catch was one of the NFL's all-time last-play stunners and it erased four decades of heartache for a franchise that was victimized by Drew Pearson's original "Hail Mary" catch; Gary Anderson missing his only

field goal of the season in the NFC title game; Brett Favre throwing across his body for a game-destroying pick in another NFC championship contest; and Blair Walsh shanking a short field goal against Seattle.

While the delirium echoed, Williams, the 42nd overall selection in last April's NFL draft, sat sobbing in front of his cubicle in the Saints' locker room.

"I'm going to take it upon myself," Williams said after composing himself for a stand-up performance in front of the assembled media, "to make sure nothing like this happens again to me."

While the magical ending in Minnesota dominated the playoff discussions, there were other notable calls in the divisional round:

EAGLES 15, FALCONS 10 — Fly Eagles Fly. With the wind and against it.

With Nick Foles engineering several long drives, Jake Elliott converting three field goals, and the defense getting stingy in the tightest spot, Philadelphia moved into the NFC championship

game with a 15-10 victory over the Atlanta Falcons on Saturday.

Foles directed brilliant marches of 74 and 80 yards in the second half — one into the whipping wind, the other with it — and Elliott atoned for missing an extra point by converting from 53 yards at the end of the second quarter, 37 and 21 in the second half. Then the Eagles (14-3) held when Atlanta (11-7) got to the 9-yard line with a first down, and to the 2 on fourth down.

When Matt Ryan's final pass sailed over Julio Jones' head in the end zone, Philly could celebrate its first playoff victory since the 2008 season.

JAGUARS 45, STEELERS 42 — The Jacksonville Jaguars, yes those Jacksonville Jaguars, are heading to the AFC championship game.

Rookie running back Leonard Fournette ran for 109 yards and three touchdowns, Blake Bortles added 214 yards passing and a vital fourth-quarter score as the relentless Jaguars stunned the Pittsburgh Steelers 45-42

on Sunday.

The third-seeded Jaguars (12-6) will face top-seeded New England next week in Foxborough, Massachusetts after jumping on Pittsburgh early, then holding on late. Jacksonville raced to a 21-point lead, fended off a Steelers rally and responded every time Pittsburgh (13-4) challenged.

Ben Roethlisberger threw for 469 yards and set a franchise record with five touchdown passes, but was also intercepted once and had a fumble returned for a score. All-Pro Antonio Brown caught seven passes for 132 yards and two touchdowns in his return from a left calf injury. Le'Veon Bell had 155 yards of total offense and two scores.

But Pittsburgh's vaunted "Killer Bs" couldn't keep pace with Jacksonville, one of four NFL franchises to never make the Super Bowl.

Twice Pittsburgh had fourth-and-1 in Jacksonville territory. Twice it did something other than have the 6-foot-5 Roethlisberger sneak. The Steelers ran wide in the first quarter and Bell

was stuffed for a 4-yard loss. The Jaguars responded immediately by going 75 yards in 11 plays, the final one a 4-yard sprint by T.J. Yeldon that put them up 21-0.

The Steelers were down a touchdown early in the fourth quarter and had fourth-and-inches at the Jacksonville 39. Roethlisberger checked at the line of scrimmage, faked a handoff to Bell and instead threw incomplete to diving rookie JuJu Smith-Schuster.

PATRIOTS 35, TITANS 14 — Tom Brady passed for three touchdowns and 337 yards, and New England cruised past Tennessee 35-14 on Saturday night to advance to their seventh consecutive conference title game.

New England (14-3) will host the winner of Sunday's divisional matchup between Jacksonville and Pittsburgh.

It was Brady's 10th career postseason game with at least three TD tosses, moving him past Joe Montana for the most in NFL history. James White caught a touchdown pass and ran for another, and Danny Amendola had 11 catches for 112 yards.

New England's victory came on the heels of a week filled with turmoil following reports of discord involving Brady, coach Bill Belichick and team owner Robert Kraft.

None of that showed on the field Saturday. "I've been around long enough," Brady said. "So, 18 years, there's so many nice things said about me. It just goes with the territory."

The Titans (10-8) took an early 7-0 lead, but New England scored 35 straight points to take control.

Marcus Mariota completed 22 of 37 passes for 254 yards and two touchdowns, but was under duress for most of the second half. He was sacked eight times, a Patriots playoff record.

New England also held Derrick Henry to just 28 yards rushing on 12 carries.

The Titans came back from an 18-point deficit in the second half to beat the Chiefs 22-21 in the wild-card round last week — the largest comeback on the road in the Super Bowl era. But the Patriots didn't give them a chance for an encore.

IONESCU: Averaging a stellar 19.2 points, 7.3 rebounds, 7.2 assists per game this season

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before they were ousted by top-seeded UConn.

Ionescu, who was named Pac-12 Freshman of the Year, averaged 14.6 points, 6.6 rebounds and 5.5 assists last season. So far this season she's averaging 19.2 points, 7.3 rebounds and 7.2 assists.

But while all her offensive numbers have gone up, she says she's been focusing on defense.

"I think everyone has to take an extra step in that direction, defensively. I think that's what's going to separate us from being an

OK team from a great team," she said. Definitely it starts individually, and I've really tried to do that."

Nationwide, she's known for those eight career triple-doubles. Ionescu hit the mark just 48 games into her college career when she had 24 points, 14 rebounds and 10 assists against Pac-12 rival Washington on Dec. 31. She broke the previous record held by both Penn State's Suzi McConnell (1985-88) and St. Mary's Louella Tomlinson (2008-11).

Ionescu was a standout at Miramonte High School

in Orinda, California, where she averaged 25.3 points, 8.8 assists, 7.6 rebounds and 4.5 steals and helped lead her team to a 32-1 record her senior season.

Considered one of the top prospects in the nation, she hung back while her peers across the nation committed. Signing day came and went while Ionescu took a thoughtful approach.

"I continued to wait and I watched the Pac-12 and some of the teams I was considering, what their coaches were telling me and how it was different or similar to how they were performing.

And I just decided the day before summer school started that this was the right fit for me, and it was," she said.

She announced her arrival in Eugene with no fanfare. She just showed up one day and told coach Kelly Graves she was in.

Graves joked that Ionescu was like Lenny Dykstra, the former Major League Baseball player: "She sets the table."

"She's smart, man, I'll tell you," Graves said. "She knows when we need her. She knows what big games are about. She always seems

to step up and play her best in those moments."

Ionescu — who says she personally admires John Stockton — is always quick to point to her teammates, including fellow sophomore Ruthy Hebard, last season's top scorer, and fellow guard Maite Cazorla.

Arizona State coach Charli Turner Thorne called the Ionescu and Cazorla "arguably the best backcourt in the country."

Ionescu said she's getting a little more attention this season from opposing teams, especially in the Pac-12 play where teams are more

familiar with her, but she appreciates the challenge.

"You really have to adjust to what teams throw at you, because they know your plays, they know your personnel. So I think that makes it difficult. You have to fight adversity in the Pac-12. They might take away your strength and you have to play to your weaknesses and perform every night or you're gonna get beat.

"That's what I like because it really tests me. Players take away my shot, or something, and I have to figure out a different way to score or help my team."

SCOREBOARD

Table containing sports scores for Local slate (Basketball, Swimming, Wrestling), Prep Standings (Baseball, Football, Basketball), and Conference Championships (NFL, NBA, Hockey, NHL).